

From the Roots



Not many artworks begin with a canoe ride down the Kentucky River. But not many artists are as true to their roots as Jennifer Heller, the Berea-based maker of willow bark baskets. Her craft is not only made in Kentucky, it's made of Kentucky. Her baskets begin their lives as huge trees, growing deep in Kentucky's soil, drinking from its biggest river.

As we glided along the bank on a sultry summer morning, Heller scouted for the perfect black willow—mature, a foot thick, no low branches. When she spotted it, she tied the canoe and clambered up the bank, ax and drawknife in hand.

She stood silent for a moment, her hands on her chosen tree. "I like to take the tree with consciousness, because it's a living thing," she said. "I thank the tree for its bark and promise

to take it to another life, and ask it to radiate its spirit from that basket."

Then she set to work, chopping a groove into the base of the tree with the ax, working a four-inch strip of bark loose with the drawknife,

and then stripping it vertically up the tree by hand, clear up to the branches. It takes tremendous strength to tear the bark loose. When the 30-foot-long strip finally crashed free, Heller peeled away the rough outer bark from the fragrant, living inner layer, the cambium, which would become her baskets. By the end of an exhaust-

ing day, she had filled her canoe with bark rolls—two trees' worth—enough to keep her weaving until next summer.

Willow bark is not a traditional fiber for basketry—it is much more supple and flexible than the white oak splints typically used in Kentucky baskets. "It's willowy," said Heller. "It's soft, it undulates. You really can't have a rigid form. That's the beauty of it."

Heller and Lisa Head of Pennsylvania, are the two American basket makers who work in willow bark—and they invented the technique together. In the early 1970s, the two friends were living on a remote farm in Lee County.



PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY KRISTIN JOHANNSEN

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Once, while clearing land, they cut down a willow, and Heller absent-mindedly began peeling its bark. She was startled to find that the inner layer was as smooth and supple as leather—obviously useful for something. After contemplating mats and clothing, she decided to turn it into a basket. An illustration in a home-steading book gave her the basic method but neglected to explain some crucial points. She puzzled them out for herself.

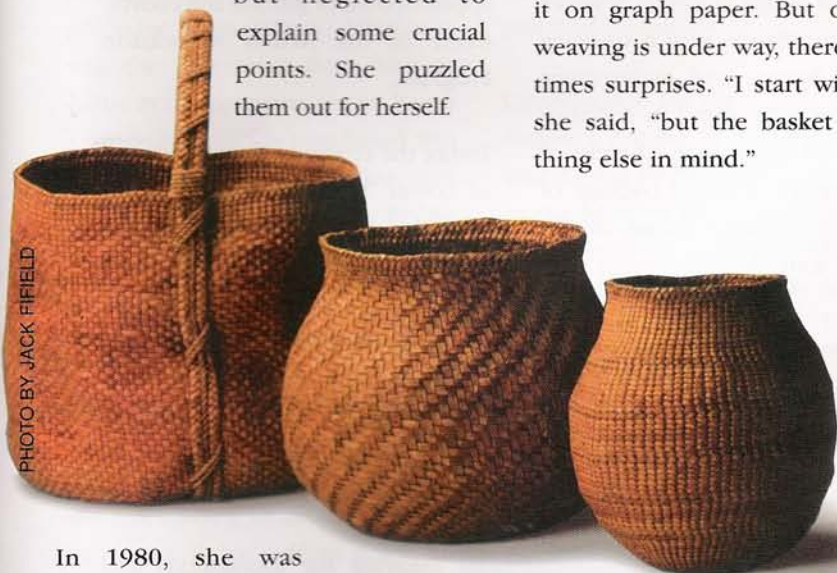


PHOTO BY JACK FIFIELD

In 1980, she was working at Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill demonstrating handloom weaving and basketry for visitors when Toni Birkhead, a Cincinnati gallery owner, spotted her work and wanted to buy it. It was a revelation: "I thought, if she wants to buy a basket, maybe someone else does too." Since then, Heller's work has been featured in dozens of regional and national exhibitions. It can be seen at Contemporary Artifacts Gallery in Berea, at Kentucky Art and Craft Gallery in Louisville, and at the Folk

Art Center, near Asheville, North Carolina.

Six weeks after our canoe trip, the rolls of bark, cured to a mellow reddish gold, were piled in a corner of Heller's studio. The next step was trimming them into thin strips one-eighth inch wide and up to 40 feet long. Incredibly, Heller does this by eye, using only a plain craft knife. The bark, the product of a living tree, contains knotholes and imperfections, and no other tool gives her the necessary control.

Working with such fine fibers is a slow, painstaking process. Heller begins by sketching the design, then calculating it on graph paper. But once the weaving is under way, there are sometimes surprises. "I start with a plan," she said, "but the basket has something else in mind."

I watched as she finished work on a square basket. Beginning from a



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square base of wider strips, she had divided each vertical spoke into two narrower spokes, woven the sides in a complex twill pattern, and ended in a finely twined rim. Now, using an awl, she coaxed in longer strands to begin the handle, tugging and easing them to the correct length.

After years of working in solitude, Heller finds herself turning outward. She recently joined the National Basketry Organization. In the past, her baskets could be seen only at a handful of galleries, but she's now moving toward a broader audience at national shows. And, most exciting, she is beginning to collaborate with other artists.



PHOTO BY DAVID ZURICH

Through these moves, Heller is sharing a treasured piece of Kentucky with the wider world. The sunlight, the rich earth, the shady bank of the Kentucky River—they're all there, in Jennifer Heller's baskets. 🍷



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